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ABSTRACT

This report outlines procedures for a weekend study session between a school board and the superintendent. The purpose of the study session is to provide an opportunity to establish basic directions and decision-making roles for the board and the superintendent. The weekend study session is usually attended by the board and the superintendent's cabinet, which is representative of all the employees in the school district and ranges in size from 6 to 15 members. Five key areas are discussed during the weekend study retreat: (1) short- and long-term goals; (2) the decision chart for the board and superintendent (examples are included); (3) keeping the board informed about pertinent situations; (4) discussion of programs; and (5) efficient board meetings and agendas. (SI)

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BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONS AND DECISION MAKING

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School districts have been experiencing increasing political activity and increasing societal pressures. The traditional roles of the board of education and of the superintendent are being challenged; the 1980s and 1990s will bring significant change in the way they complement each other in their educational responsibilities. To establish efficient and effective relationships between the board and the superintendent, good communication and decision-making procedures are essential.

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THE WEEKEND STUDY SESSION

After working with 50 board members throughout a 20-year period, I have found that a two-day study session with the board, beginning Friday evening with dinner and going through Sunday afternoon, provides an effective opportunity to establish basic directions and decision-making roles for the board and superintendent. The weekend study session is usually attended by the board and the superintendent's cabinet, which is representative of all the employees in the school district and ranges in size from 6 to 15 members.

ARRANGEMENTS

THE MEDIA ATTENDS

A representative of the media is invited to attend this study session to comply with the "sunshine laws" that exist in many states.

It is preferable to invite the editor. If numerous media are present in the community then representatives of those media should be included in the invitation. Because the study session is devoted purely to study and discussion and is completely void of any formal decisions by the board, the press usually does not attend more than the first evening, unless it is the editor. Weekend assignment of reporters for the study session is expensive due to the overtime.

LOCATION OF THE STUDY SESSION

Study sessions can be held in a comfortable surrounding such as a hotel or a religious retreat where the participants can be housed and fed for the weekend. There seemed to be fewer objections from the taxpayers and from the news media when the local board and administrators held their study session at a "religious" retreat rather than a "resort."

TIME FOR STUDY SESSION

The study session with the board and the superintendent's administrative cabinet is usually held once a year.

AGENDA FOR STUDY SESSION

Five major agenda items are addressed during the study session: short- and long-term goals, decision chart for the board and superintendent, plans for keeping the board informed, efficient board meetings and agendas, and discussion of programs.

I believe that discussion in these five major areas enhances the effective and efficient working relationships between the board and superintendent, no matter what the variables are in a particular school district.

Agenda item one: Establish the district one-year and three-to-five year goals through a Delphi process.

Agenda item two: Resolve the decision chart for the board and superintendent, considering about 100 different decision situations that might occur during the year for decision by the superintendent and the board.

Agenda item three: Develop plans for the superintendent to keep the board informed by identifying situations about which the board wishes to be informed in addition to those contained in the decision chart. The smaller the school district the more detailed is the information about which the board wishes to be informed. Usually, the best arrangement is agreement between the board and the superintendent on a procedure of alerting each other to rumors or to matters that they think the others should be informed about in addition to the regular written and oral communication that takes place in the district. Board members like to be apprised of what is going on instead of reading it in the newspaper as a surprise. Because it is especially difficult for a superintendent to know when reporters are making inquiries into district school matters it becomes imperative that board members assume a responsibility, if they hear rumors or activities taking place that might be of interest to the others, to alert the communication network so the information can be relayed to the rest of the board and to the superintendent.

Agenda item four: Plan for the most effective way the board meeting can be held in public. Agenda techniques and procedures should be thoroughly discussed and agreed to so the board can put its "best foot forward" during board meetings.

Agenda item five: Discuss topics and programs for which the board members would like to have an orientation and more information. Those items are usually generated by board members, though the superintendent can present a list of possible topics.

DECISION CHART FOR BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT

While participants are waiting for print-outs of the goals, which would be typed that evening and be ready for the group Saturday morning, they begin to discuss the second major portion of the study session which is determining the decision chart for the board and the superintendent.

Much of the superintendent's day is devoted to decision making. Often the superintendent asks the question "Should I decide on my own or should I involve the board in some way?" District policy together with administrative procedures and a job description usually help minimize ambiguities in decision making.

However, many "undefined areas" exist which cause a degree of uncertainty as to the strategy a superintendent should follow in the decision-making process. Discussing these areas of ambiguity among the board and the superintendent beforehand helps identify decision-making responsibilities. Having done so, energy previously expended in efforts to determine the extent of involvement as to who makes the decision can be rechanneled into finding the solution.

To clarify the working relationship between the superintendent and the school board, I used a decision chart. An example of this chart follows.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. The general purpose of this chart is to clarify the distribution of *operational*—not legal—authority within the district organization. A more specific purpose is to clarify to what degree powers which are vested in the district as a whole have been delegated to the superintendent. We are not concerned with limitations that have been imposed upon the superintendent or the district from external sources, such as by law or contracts. Rather, we are interested in limitations that have been imposed internally, such as by district organization, board policy, regulation or "practice", upon a superintendent's flexibility to decide to act in various situations. In going through this chart, we are not concerned with whether the particular decision (or action) proposed is a wise one. The question at issue is: "Assuming the superintendent wanted to make that decision, does he have the operational authority to do so?"

In some cases, responsibility and authority are vested in a particular body or position by law or administrative regulation, and for this reason certain actions and decisions must go through the formality or approval by that body or position. For example, all appointments of teachers to fill established vacancies are usually approved by boards, but a board does not generally study and review the decision to hire specific applicants. For purposes of the present analysis, *if a superintendent can make a decision with virtual assurance that approval will follow as a formality, then the superintendent should be consid-*

ered as having the authority to make the decision (operational authority).

2. On the following pages situations are proposed for decision or action. To complete the chart, select for each situation the one degree of operational authority you believe most closely describes the authority the superintendent has in connection with that situation.

DEGREES OF OPERATIONAL AUTHORITY are as follows:

I. Superintendent has complete authority to decide or act (within limits of law, board policy, contracts, and budget).

II. Superintendent has complete authority to decide or act, but must keep board informed about the decision made or action taken.

III. Superintendent has authority to decide or act only with prior approval of the board.

IV. Superintendent may be asked for recommendations, but decision, responsibility and direction come from the board.

3. In some cases the superintendent may not exercise his operational authority personally, but may delegate it to one or more members of the staff. Such cases, when the superintendent has the authority to permit the staff to take action or make decisions, should be considered no differently than when the superintendent exercises the authority personally.

4. Assume that availability of funds is not a limiting factor—any funds necessary have already been budgeted, are within tax limits, or will be made available through budgetary transfers.

5. Please add any questions, which you feel should be resolved, at the end of the chart.

6. Your superintendent and staff will be more efficient and effective if they know their operational authority. It is important to have a systematic management plan for the school district.

CONTENTS OF THE DECISION CHART

Depending on the school district and the members of the board, the chart will usually contain a hundred potential decision situations. The items—drawn from actual circumstances that require decisions—occur in such areas as curriculum, personnel, finance, community relations, and internal school operations. Authority is fluid, a matter of degree, but for convenience we have calibrated the overall range of authority into four distinct levels.

Level one: The superintendent has complete authority to decide or act within the limits of the law, the board policy, propriety and conscience, negotiated contracts, the educational code, and the budget.

Level two: The superintendent has complete authority to decide or to act but must keep the board informed about the decision or action.

Level three: The superintendent has authority to implement or act only with prior approval from the school board.

Level four: The school board initiates the action and may encourage the superintendent to make recommendations. The difference between level three and level four is that in level four the board of education has the responsibility to initiate the action or to ask the staff for recommendations; whereas in level three the initiation of the action comes from the superintendent to the board. However, in both level three and four the board has the final authority.

GETTING STARTED

During discussion by the board members and the superintendent, consensus—regarding which decision situations to list on the chart, and the appropriate disposition of authority level in each situation—is the goal. To begin this process, each board member is asked to review a list of proposed decisions and to amend the list if they wish. Next, the board members and the superintendent go through the list independent of one another. Each participant indicates what, in their opinion, is the appropriate level of authority for each potential situation. This is done prior to the weekend study session. Before going on retreat, the individual results are compiled and a composite is made showing each person's judgments.

EXAMPLE

LAKE PARK HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 108
600 South Medinah Road
Roselle, Illinois 60172

DECISION CHART FOR SUPERINTENDENT/BOARD

January, 1986

I Complete Authority	II Act/Inform	III Prior Approval	IV Board Direction		
	X			1.	Put a new program in mathematics into the Lake Park High School curriculum.
X				2.	Permit Lake Park High School to replace a major portion of the maps, films, and written materials (other than books) for the social studies/history curriculum in order to better meet district goals.
		X		3.	Establish a School Site Council.
	X			4.	Initiate (or abandon) a program of participative management in the district.
X				5.	Have students meet with teachers for considering curriculum changes.
	X			6.	Permit a choral group to compete at a festival out of the Chicago area that would require staying overnight.
X				7.	Approve a field trip to an electronic equipment assembly plant in Chicago area (same day).
X				8.	Select textbooks for Lake Park High School.
		X		9.	Approve textbooks for Lake Park High School.
		X		10.	Promote a teacher to principal who has a reputation of being a militant.
		X		11.	Initiate (or abandon) a flexible scheduling program at Lake Park High School.
		X		12.	Decide which courses to cut to meet budget demands.

EXAMPLE

LAKE PARK HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 108
600 South Medinah Road
Roselle, Illinois 60172

DECISION CHART FOR SUPERINTENDENT/BOARD

January, 1986

I Complete Authority	II Act/Inform	III Prior Approval	IV Board Direction		
	X			13.	Decide which extracurricular activities to offer which involve additional budget funds.
X				14.	Approve a staff request for a foreign-made brand of tape recorder that has not been used at Lake Park High School prior to this time.
X				15.	Exchange teaching assignments between two teachers at different campuses.
		X		16.	Initiate a new and sensitive (i.e., family life) program.
X				17.	Retain a consultant, not on district staff, to assist our principals in setting up a remedial reading program within general purpose budgeted funds.
		X		18.	Increase the student-teacher ratio.
			X	19.	Initiate a 12-month school year.
	X			20.	Agree to a Regional Occupation Program contract with DAVEA for a 10% increase over last year.
X				21.	Establish an additional class section rather than increase size of existing classes.
	X			22.	Formulate and publish administrative regulations to implement Board policy.
	X			23.	Suspend distribution of an issue of the student newspaper.
	X			24.	Provide district lifetime athletics/school event passes to distinguished community citizens.

REACHING CONSENSUS

At the retreat the board members and the superintendent discuss their selections. Often, areas are identified in which both the superintendent and the board members feel they should exercise maximum authority. Additional areas are found in which neither the board or the superintendent claims authority. Responsibility in these latter instances is usually assigned to the superintendent as the item tends to be quite difficult to administer such as terminating a principal.

Some items have marks by the participants in all four decision categories, but as the discussion proceeds, usually at considerable length, clarification occurs and consensus follows. The advantage of using this process is the development of a solid understanding concerning philosophic differences among board members, and between the board and the superintendent regarding methods of school system operation. Because no absolute answers exist, the final outcome is the consensus.

In a relaxed and tranquil setting, a thorough understanding is achieved about who should have what degree of authority for the various aspects of operating the schools. Everyone learns where the other stands, not just on abstract issues, but in terms of actual school functions.

The board generally prefers to delegate the majority of decisions to the superintendent with the proviso that they be kept informed. This is an attitude common among large complex systems. School boards in small systems ordinarily prefer to retain more direct decision-making authority.

HOW OFTEN IS THE CHART DONE?

Whenever new members are elected to the school board the chart is redone. If board composition remains unchanged the chart should be redone every two or three years to ensure that the school system is being operated in accordance with current conditions and attitudes.

AUTHORITY CAN BE DELEGATED TO OTHER STAFF BY THE SAME CHART PROCESS

Areas of authority given to the superintendent may subsequently be delegated to other members of the administrative team. A similar decision chart is developed by the superintendent and school principals. A third decision chart is developed by the principal at the building level.

MAINTAINING HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

School board members and superintendents can maintain close and harmonious working relationships even during times of high emotion and intense controversy. The key to survival is a simple management plan that addresses school problems in a systematic way. Organization development and systems management are essential to running an effective school district. Equally vital are frequent

exchanges of feelings and views among school board members and the superintendent, especially in situations of stress.

ASSISTS IN UNDERSTANDING BOARD POLICY

The fact that the school board and the superintendent's cabinet set one-year and three-to-five-year goals and then subsequently resolve a decision chart for every conceivable decision that might come up between the board and the superintendent helps to build an understanding of how the policy of the board of directors will be carried out in detail by the administrative team. I have also noted over the years that board members who have been successful in business or who work in large organizations tend to give the superintendent and the staff more authority. The longer the board and the superintendent work together, the greater the tendency of those board members to give their superintendent and staff more authority. If this does not happen, the superintendent should consider that his job may be in jeopardy.

HOW LONG DOES THE PROCESS TAKE?

Resolving the decision chart takes from 90 minutes to 4 hours depending on whether the repsonses seem to reflect wide differences or consensus.

SOME EXAMPLES

An interesting example from the decision chart is the matter of conference attendance by staff. Instead of coming to the board for approval each time a staff member wants to attend a workshop, the board allows the superintendent to submit a report to the board every six months or annually on conference attendance. Concerns the board may have are changed for the future.

It is essential for participants to understand that there are no right answers on the decision chart. Rather it is an exercise of consensus, so the superintendent and staff can understand how the "owners of the store" want the business of the school district conducted. It is far better to know what the board wants in the area of decision making ahead of time, before matters become controversial and the superintendent is surprised that the assumed authority is not there. This proves to be an embarrassment because the board does not support the recommendations of the superintendent during critical times.

In one instance when I was superintendent, the board decided that as long as they were informed I should have transfer authority. Because they were informed regarding a controversial high school principal transfer, the board upheld the decision of the superinten-

dent even though many parents and students were demonstrating and objecting to losing their principal by the transfer.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU REFER TO THE CHART?

You probably will not look at the chart often because a basic understanding exists that was engendered when you developed the chart. You should resolve the decision chart during times of calm and peace when participants can be objective.

WHAT AREAS ARE THE MOST SENSITIVE?

The most sensitive items occur in the areas of budget transfers, personnel, and conference attendance.

KEEPING THE BOARD INFORMED

THE FRIDAY REPORT

The third area discussed during the weekend study retreat is keeping the board informed about pertinent situations occurring in the school district. Even though participants can indicate on the board-superintendent decision chart items about which the board needs to be informed, those tend to be routine informational items. Each Friday, the superintendent should mail a report to the board regarding the highlights of that particular week.

BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT ARE EQUALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR INFORMATION

For years I let the board make it my sole responsibility to keep them informed of things that were happening within the district; this usually occurred by way of a phone call to all five or seven board members and became a difficult responsibility to achieve. Invariably something would happen in the school district and board members would hear about it before I could contact them. After the Watergate incident, during the Nixon administration, reporters and local newspapers styled themselves as inquiry reporters looking for scandal, hoping to find some newsworthy event that would appear on the front page of the local newspaper. It became impossible for me to know everything that was happening within the district before others did. This was especially true in larger districts.

As a result, I informed the board before the weekend study session that they needed to be thinking about items about which they wished to be informed. Did they want to know about significant happenings to personnel such as someone being in the hospital? About a death that had occurred among students or staff? Did they want to know

about fights of significance on campus, or drug related arrests, or knifings, or shootings?

I could usually convince the board to assume equal responsibility for any events they might have heard of by rumor, by grapevine, by some person on the staff, or by a student informing them. It was their responsibility, if they thought an item was newsworthy, to alert my office, so the rest of the board could be informed. We would either place the information in the Friday report, or, if I felt it were highly significant, I would immediately initiate the phone tree to inform the board so they would not be surprised later.

INFORMATION VARIES

Depending on the size of the district, the amount of information the board wanted varied. In small districts, the board wanted to know when there was an objection to a bus stop or when a bus did not pick up students and we had a complaint by a parent. In large districts, the board only wanted to know about major happenings such as a shooting on the campus, or a drug bust by the police, or when a school had been burned or vandalized, rather than personnel incidents or parent complaints.

Additional items about which the board wanted to be informed were added to the decision chart.

DISCUSSION OF PROGRAMS

The fifth and major area addressed during the weekend study session is a list of selected topics to be discussed in depth. These topics are usually submitted by board members, and, if not, topics are suggested by staff. This approach allows considerable in-depth orientation and discussion of such major areas as special education, family life education, or science education. If the board only wants information concerning various programs, a presentation is made by the proper staff member who may not be a participant in the study session but who is brought in for this special presentation.

Items which the board may want to discuss might include the transportation system and how the buses are scheduled throughout the district, or a preliminary discussion of growth or declining enrollment issues. Often emerging from these discussions is a request by the board to bring a proposal to a board meeting for a formal decision.

You should indicate on the study session agenda a time allotment for each of the topics.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

As indicated earlier, it is important for the study session to occur in a comfortable and relaxed environment—a hotel or a religious retreat. However, I have had boards who were reluctant to spend any extra money for housing or food during the weekend.

After a recall of the board—three new members were elected who were antagonistic toward the other two members and the superintendent—the weekend study session was held in the board room. Participants made their own arrangements for meals. Four television stations and nine newspapers were present, however they all left by Saturday noon.

The weekend study session contributed to a better working relationship between the newly constituted board and the superintendent. Staff made it clear that the board "owned the store" and that the professional staff was there to carry out the policies and directions of the board that were further clarified through the goal-setting process and the board-superintendent decision chart. During the next year, the board and superintendent worked well together.

The skills of working with a diverse or factionalized board are much like those which city managers use in working with city councils who usually are elected by partisan, vested-interest groups. Seldom does a city council have complete unanimity of philosophy among the members. More frequently now, school boards are elected by partisan, vested-interest groups; the chances of having philosophical unanimity among the members are becoming less likely.

SHOULD SPOUSES ATTEND?

The consideration of spouse attendance depends on whether or not the board and staff are compatible. If you are able to hold the weekend study session at a retreat in a comfortable environment that can accommodate everyone, spouses could be included and could participate in the social activities.

If compatibility exists and if you want to establish a close rapport among board and staff, I recommend that spouses be invited to all sessions and that the weekend agenda allow for socializing and recreation. This creates a spirit of team unity, yet allows the board to carry out its policy function.

WHO IS ON THE SUPERINTENDENT'S CABINET?

The superintendent's cabinet is a representative group which includes principals, representatives from transportation, food services, maintenance, and other departments. Depending on the employee unions, it can be desirable to have a representative from their group which could be the president.

Although many other areas can be considered in board-superintendent relations and decision making, the practical activities I have mentioned in this article can definitely contribute to a stronger board-superintendent relationship, to greater cooperation within the educational community, and to improved educational programs for all learners in our schools.